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ABSTRACT

In 1990, Warner Brothers Television made a bold decision to recruit new, young writers from outside the Los Angeles (California) area. The method they first chose was a contest for East-coast Baltimore (Maryland) area. The writers with the reward of an opportunity to receive additional training in Los Angeles. Since this approach was expensive, they later tried a second approach, a conference for faculty with the idea of creating a "farm league" of writing programs in the Mid-Atlantic region. During the summer of 1990, Warners and the Maryland Film Commission invited all the major colleges and universities in the Maryland, Delaware, Virginia and District of Columbia areas to send representatives to a professors' seminar in Baltimore. Though most of the professors left the conference before the second day, a dozen or so stayed and were well-rewarded. Gregg Mayday, one of the organizers provided course outlines, training models, and titles of texts that could be used in college writing classes. Warner's basic contention was that too many writers in Los Angeles were ill-prepared to write for television. They were ignorant of the business--how stories are bought, produced, and eventually put on the air. These business practices have an enormous impact on the writing process. The skills that Warners requires are skills appropriate for any English program, theater, or communication student, even those who had no interest in pursuing a career in Los Angeles. Television writing has a place in college curriculums. (TB)

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ED 376 500

WARNER'S ACADEMIC OUTREACH: ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

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In 1990, Warner Bros. Television made a bold decision to recruit new, young writers from outside the Los Angeles area. An invitation from the Maryland Film Commission, an agency charged with bringing film business to the state, lured Warner's New Writer Recruitment Program to Baltimore, Maryland. With Baltimore as a base, Warners cast their net over the Delaware, Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C. region in search of fresh talent. The method they first chose was a contest for area writers with the reward an opportunity to go to Los Angeles, receive additional training in the craft of writing for television, and assistance in starting a career in the business. Concurrent with this process, the staff of the New Writers Recruitment Program challenged area colleges and universities to diversify their curriculum into the area of writing for prime time television in order to create a larger supply of talented and well prepared young writers for today's expanding television industry.

Warner Bros. has been holding television writing workshops in Burbank since 1976. There they take people with writing and story-telling skills and develop their talents specifically for the television medium. Their program, being well-known, has no difficulty in finding applicants from the pool of hopefuls in the Los Angeles area. The staff of the New Writers Recruitment Division screen applicants and reduce their number competitively to ten or fifteen who are selected to be part of a particular year's program. Traditionally, the speakers at the

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workshops are executives, producers, writers and others from the current array of Warner Bros. and Lorimar television shows on the air at any given time. These people are not only knowledgeable of the writing craft but are also good contacts for later employment. This gives the program in California high visibility with students, recent graduates of the schools in Southern California and new writers to the Los Angeles area, often at the urging of their agents.

Except for Los Angeles and perhaps New York, television writing is primarily a journalistic pursuit. To attract attention to their program in Baltimore, the Film Commission announced a competition open to anyone who thought he or she could write television comedy. Contestants submitted an original script for any comedy show currently on television, although it was possible to submit other samples of their comedic writing, including one act plays or short stories. Entrants could be individuals or partners writing as a team. The Warner Bros. staff in Burbank screened the entries and selected a dozen or so winners, including individuals and teams, to participate in an intensive, one-week workshop in a downtown Baltimore hotel. The only instruction given to the selected students was to arrive on the first day with several ideas for stories appropriate for any prime time television show currently on-air, but not produced by either Warner Bros. or Lorimar. They would be delivering these story ideas orally as pitches.

Pitching a story idea is presenting it as if you had just seen the show, were thrilled by it, and had just a few minutes to tell someone about it. The complete story idea needs to be distilled to the kernel of its basic elements. It's story-telling and improvisational performance combined with a little moxie. For a syndicated show, the pitch would be for a story that uniquely and

interestingly uses the show's principal characters and regular sets. A good pitch quickly presents a story idea where the conflict stretches or expands one of the major characters or tests one of the relationships on the show.

Throughout the first morning, the students pitched ideas to a producer and several Warner Bros. executives. The panel listened to each presentation, identified the best idea and worked with the student to solve the more obvious flaws. They then told the person to develop their idea and bring back an expanded story after lunch. Few of the participants ate lunch that day or any other day during the workshop. And, as the week progressed, the pitches first expanded into treatments, then step-outlines, scenes with dialogue, entire acts, and finally, by the end of the workshop, completed first draft scripts.

Treatments are complete summaries of the story's action minus most of the dialogue. Either pitched orally or written, they are presented in the third person, present tense as if the storyteller were describing the action on the screen as it happens. A good treatment defines the structure, detailing the major events of the story and how they affect the characters. Treatments are developed into step-outlines which break the story into specific scenes. This phase clarifies each scene or turn of the plot as a step, moving the story forward. In this stage, more dialogue is included, especially if it moves the story along or is particularly funny. Step outlines give a complete road map of the story structure with the implications of conflict on the characters. They are easily expanded into scenes and acts, allowing a focus on dialogue and humor in the process.

At each stage of the process, the students were encouraged to get involved in each others' work. The students were beginning to learn the skills of working at a table. As camaraderie and confidence grew, people were offering suggestions for plot twists, lines, jokes and funny situations. Ownership and pride of authorship was replaced by a cooperative effort to make each student's work as successful as possible. In the production of a weekly television series for a network, the script is brought to the table of producers and writers at the beginning of the week. The staff all work together to make the story stronger, work out flaws of logic and mis-characterization and get the show as funny as they possibly can. It's a give-and-take, high energy, sometimes frustrating and sometimes fun situation. It's similar to a group of jazz musicians jamming. It is not uncommon for the writer's version of the script at the beginning of the week to bear only slight resemblance to the work produced at the end of the week.

As the week ended, the staff sent the students home to polish their draft and send it to Warner Bros. by a specific date. These scripts would be evaluated and if the New Writers Recruitment staff found any to be outstanding, they would invite the students to Burbank to participate in their LA Writers Workshop. The presumption was that those who did well in the LA Workshop would get assistance in finding a position with a Warner Bros. or Lorimar production. Two writers, working as a team, were selected and are today writing for television in Hollywood.

Although the contest approach was successful, bringing the workshop to Baltimore would be too expensive to continue indefinitely, so concurrent with this effort, Warner Bros. decided to

try another approach.

During Warner's first visit to Baltimore, the Maryland Film Commission encouraged the two people principally responsible for Warner's New Writers Recruitment Program, Mr. Gus Blackman and his associate, Ms. Una Hart, to visit representative area colleges and universities. There they met with writing teachers to discuss television writing. They learned that most communication classes emphasize journalistic writing. English and Drama Department writing professors focus on playwriting or feature filmwriting rather than writing for prime-time television. The simple reason in each case is that most textbooks are geared toward journalism, theater or film. Additionally, examples of television scripts are difficult to obtain and, traditionally, the television market is unassailable for the novice writer. Television writing also lacks some of the prestige or even legitimacy of writing for the news, theater or cinema and certainly those who did would have to live in Los Angeles, further limiting its appeal both to teachers and students.

Ms. Hart and Mr. Blackman challenged the teachers to diversify their curriculum to include writing for prime time television. Television, they argued, is a dramatic form familiar to students. This familiarity provides access for students to learn basic writing skills, discover avenues of personal expression and gain self-confidence by testing their comedy writing skills in a classroom environment. It is also an idea! from for students to learn interpersonal skills by sharing the table experience and even collaborative writing. As an inducement, Mr. Blackman and Ms. Hart expressed a commitment for creating a "farm league" of writing programs in the Mid-

Atlantic Region. Warner Bros. would provide participating professors access to industry professionals and classroom support with copies of scripts and video tapes of shows students could study. In addition, their staff would give professional coverage or critique of selected student work and they would provide some access to the industry for a few handpicked graduates. It was an attractive offer, but many of us felt unqualified, never having served in the trenches of prime time television.

During the summer of 1990, Warner Bros. and the Maryland Film Commission invited all the major colleges and universities in the Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C. areas to send representatives to a Professor's Seminar Baltimore. Morgan State sent Valerie Sedlak, Frostberg sent Betty Favre, Maryland Public Television sent Helen Jean Burn and I came, representing American University. Approximately three dozen or so professors attended. Warner Bros. sent Mr. Blackman and Ms. Hart from the New Writers Recruitment Program with Bob Eisele, one of their top producers of one-hour dramas (The Equalizer) and Mr. Gregg Mayday, at that time, their Vice President of Movies and Mini-series. Mr. Mayday, a graduate of Syracuse University, led the three-day program with a clear vision of how we could teach writing for television. To aid us in the process, Mr. Mayday had brought along suggestions for course outlines and training models based on their successful ten-week workshop. He presented a curriculum model for teaching the half-hour television situation comedy and another for teaching the longer forms of hour dramas and Movies of the Week. He also provided titles of texts we could use, and the Warner Bros. staff promised to support our work with information, visiting writers, and a commitment to read the scripts of our best writers who might want to move to LA to become

professional writers. For three days, Mr. Mayday and the staff immersed us in information regarding the structure and nature of the entertainment television business, the annual production cycle, the job of free-lance and staff writers, and how this stuff relates to the creative process. We also spent time dissecting a show and analyzing its elements in terms of basic structure and characterization.

When it became evident that no one from Warner Bros. wanted to see the screenplays the professors had brought, about one third of the class disappeared during the first lunch break. Another third, some perhaps disappointed that there would be no connection to Warner's motion picture business and some skeptical of Warner's motivation, did not bother showing up on the second day. The dozen or so remaining faculty, in the midst of talk about pitches, table drafts and act blows, began to see the enormous possibilities and ultimate benefits we could bring to our students by embracing this curriculum. The most convincing argument was that the courses we would be teaching would be attractive to and would benefit a great number of students who did not see these courses as merely a stepping stone to a job in the industry.

Mr. Mayday had brought along suggestions for course outlines and training models based on their successful ten-week workshop. He also provided titles of texts we could use. He, Mr. Eisele, Mr. Blackman and Ms. Hart detailed a writing program based on their experiences and defined to meet industry needs for writers. They wanted us to provide students to the basic prerequisites for entering their program or an entry level position in the industry by teaching the basics, how to write a story, plus the reality of the television business.

Warner's basic contention was that too many writers in Los Angeles were ill-prepared to write for television. They were ignorant of the business--how stories are bought, produced and eventually put on the air. They did not understand the basic corporate structure of networks and their relationship to production companies through syndication and how money is made. And, what was more important, they were unfamiliar with writing for the hybrid of film and theater that has become Prime Time Television. There is a constant turnover in the television industry. To improve the quality of television writing and to prepare for the increasing number of new shows coming on cable and being sold over seas, a new pool of writers is needed. Yet, those writers need professional and consistent training, given by experienced instructors in a classroom setting. The Warner Bros. staff were willing to fine tune and hone a skilled writer's craft, but they wanted us to teach the basics as they related to the television industry.

Much of the first day of the seminar was spent on what they called TV-101, the basics of the business. In the motion picture business, the burden of creative choices lies with a director. She or he will correct the real or perceived failings of the screenplay and be held responsible for the film's success or failure at the box office. Television is a writer's medium. Ultimately, the success or failure of any show or series lies with the Executive Producer, a writer, not the show's director. This one individual is held accountable by the network for every show that goes on the air. Thus, writers become intimately involved in the business of production. As they move up the ladder of the production structure, they become more involved in collaborating with other writers, working with the director, actors, and the production staff. Eventually, they will begin negotiating with networks or syndications and ultimately create and sell their own ideas for

television movies or develop a new series of their own.

The business practices have an enormous impact on the writing process. As already noted, the collaborative table experience is because of the accountability of Executive Producer, not an individual author, to the network or production company. The individual writer's reputation isn't on the line for the show, the producers's is. The time factor of taking a draft script and bringing it into production in five days forces choices on the writers that a more relaxed schedule might not. It also teaches the writer to plunge to the heart of the story, theme and characterization with speed and precision. It compels writers to be as familiar with the conventions and structures of drama as a conductor with forms of musical composition.

The show's ownership by the Executive Producer has an impact on a writers approach to characterization. Many of us had been teaching that the basics of story telling start with the creation of character. In television, however, only the most experienced writers can present a new show with new characters to a network. Novice writers create scripts for existing shows with existing characters. Thus, we were encouraged to have students begin by writing spec scripts. They suggested students could learn to take existing characters and try to discover new areas of their characterization or even reveal some yet-unexplored nuance. Students could learn how to stretch the relationships within the given cast or confront the characters with conflicts that would allow them to grow. This, they felt, allowed a student to study character while learning story structure.

Television, in spite of its reputation as a mass appeal medium, adheres to the Aristotelian principles of dramatic structure. It is founded on the traditions of story telling that hark back to Aesop, the myths of Greece and Rome and the tales of Chaucer and through it, students can access these works as well as the antecedents from drama.

Several Warner's staff members pointed out that although all writers *cum* producers were not always the best business people, they all respected good writing, perhaps more than the motion picture side of Hollywood. Mr. Mayday and the other producers and writers we met then and since then have cautioned writers who wish to present themselves well with their spec scripts to put care in the writing and images they create with words. They encouraged creating a certain pacing of noun, verb and object and the miserly use of flowery adjectives. This attitude toward writing and writers is an important distinction between the film and television industries. Television is looking for writers, not for scripts. Beginning screenwriters and playwrights attempt to sell their work; beginning television writers sell themselves as writers. The script a writer will show an agent or producer will have been written for an ongoing show with a given cast of characters to show off his or her writing ability. That script written on speculation, or spec script, will probably never be sold or produced, but instead will be used as a writing sample or "calling-card" to gain access to producers where the writer then displays his or her creativity by pitching ideas for that producer's show. In fact, it is generally accepted that a novice writer would never show a spec script for a particular show to the producer of that show.

By the end of the workshop, it was quite clear to several of us that television writing should appropriately be part of our program's curriculum. The skills Warner Bros. required were skills appropriate for any English, theater or communication student even when their goal was not to live in Los Angeles, writing for a television series. And, for a student who has a love of writing, television writing is an exciting medium to work in. In terms of developing writing skills, there is no place like television. Television writers do a lot of writing. You learn about yourself as a writer on a series. More than theater or the motion picture industry, it allows a writer to see his or her work performed on a consistent basis. A feature filmscript writer may take a year or more writing, selling and waiting for the completed production before seeing the fruits of his or her screenplay. A playwright may be able to shorten the process to months, but in television, material you write on Monday is produced on Friday and goes on the air in a matter of weeks. In terms of guiding students toward television as opposed to the motion picture business, television as an industry employs more writers than the film industry. There are perhaps 150 men and women in Hollywood making their living solely by writing feature filmscripts. There are about a thousand earning a living writing for television. Although screenplays are commanding prices in the one and a half to three million dollar range, the range of income for many of television's executive producers is between three to seventeen million over a three year period.

Following the workshop, several of us approached the English and Communication departments of our universities with the proposition of developing courses or programs to teach the basic writing for television skills. The Warner Bros. staff promised to support our work with information, visiting writers, and a commitment to read scripts of our best writers who might

want to move to LA to become professional writers.

Many of us had been teaching that the basics of story telling start with the creation of character. In television, however, only the most experienced writers can present a new show with new characters to a network. Novice writers create scripts for existing shows with existing characters. Thus, we were encouraged to have students begin by writing spec scripts. They suggested students could learn to take existing characters and try to stretch their relationships or confront the characters with conflicts that would allow them to grow or reveal some yet-unexplored nuance. This, they felt, was the way to study character while learning story structure. In my experience since then, I've found that this actually helps students separate the idea that the story elucidates from the story itself. Students find it a rewarding form of personal expression that expresses to an audience the ideas they want to communicate as storytellers. They begin to appreciate the complexities of characterization and in those classes and exercises where they do create characters from scratch, the characters are less cartoon-like, two dimensional devices that only exist for a particular story, but more believable, well-rounded beings that appear to be drawn from real life.

Most of the teachers present at the workshop felt they were on familiar ground with the basics of story structure. Film is primarily episodic in structure, moving from sequences of action to other sequences, relying more on visual exposition than verbal. Theater is more verbal in its presentation and more linear in structure, maintaining a stronger link to the classical conventions

of unity: unity of time, place and character. Television is a little of both. Television drama leans more to its filmic cousin for visual events and actions that drive the production and more variety of settings. Situation comedies are more related to theater, relying more heavily on dialogue to carry the story forward and in maintaining the unities. And, oddly enough, the conflict in situation comedies arises from character as opposed to the situation.

What became increasingly clear through the workshop was that Warner Bros. and the television industry are seriously looking for writers who understand the basics and can write for a given character, who have a strong sense of style, an understanding of structure and teleplay form and have that certain chemistry that allows them to collaborate and share with others and an ability to write fast.

I was in the fortunate position of already having a course in advanced writing scheduled for that fall. Being the Director of the Program, I also have more flexibility and support than others might. I sent a letter to each of the enrolled students laying out the proposition of dedicating the class to television rather than feature film. Nearly every student agreed and the few who didn't were happy to write for feature films as independent studies. Warner Bros. sent video tapes, scripts and was responsive to every question I had. In the Spring, Fred Rubin, one of the writers for *Night Court* was sent to Baltimore to visit Helen Jean Burns' class at Johns Hopkins. With support from American University, I was able to take a handful of interested students to Baltimore to audit his presentation. As the workshop began in Los Angeles that spring, Warner Bros. sent audio tapes of the workshop to the faculty and allowed selected students to participate

in their workshop via telephone to one of the Warner's staff members. The competition and student workshop was held again in Baltimore that Spring for the last time and with support from my university, gave me an opportunity to audit the Warner Bros. writing program in an albeit truncated form. At the end of that summer, several students from our classes were invited to Los Angeles for a one-week internship with one of the Warner Bros. or Lorimar shows.

Warner's original plan was to create a series of "farm leagues" throughout the country. They pitched faculty in New England and also in Chicago before they had to curtail their efforts for budgetary reasons. However, they have continued to support those schools in the Mid-Atlantic Region who continue to teach television writing, and the program for those of us who do, is enormously successful.